

# THE DUCKING OF HERBERT POLTON

## AND COINCIDENCE

BY  
H. C. McNEILE



NEW YORK  
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

PZ 3

.M2329

Du

COPY 1

PZ 3  
M2329  
Du

COPYRIGHT, 1924,  
BY H. C. MC NEILE

THE DUCKING OF HERBERT POLTON AND COINCIDENCE

— B —

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

© Cl A 815336

DEC 22 1924

# THE DUCKING OF HERBERT POLTON

**O**F course it's the old, old story—two men and a woman. But it ended so wonderfully right: it might almost have been the conventional happy ending of the stage. And not only did it end right for the two principal characters, but a whole host of supers who don't even appear in the plot regarded the affair with a sort of dazed, hysterical joy.

Decorous City magnates departed from their usual abstemious habits, and consumed champagne for luncheon when they heard of it: in fact, if young Bill Saunderson had asked for a wedding present he would probably have got a check running into five figures subscribed by a large number of people whom he had never heard of in his life.

In fact, Moyra's Uncle William— However, of Uncle William more anon. But Bill was asking for nothing except Moyra Jackson, and when all is said and done he'd have been a greedy blighter if he had. And when it became evident that he was the winner out of a very large field, it was significant that every other competitor, short of winning himself, was pleased. All, that is, except one, and he was the third principal.

Bill wasn't exactly engaged to Moyra when he went out to British East Africa to make his fortune. In fact, the field was open.

"How the devil can I tie her down like that?" he said to me one day at lunch at the club. "I've got four hundred a year and a gratuity of two thousand quid. It's impossible, Squash-face: it wouldn't be fair to her."

(As this story is strictly true, I must reveal, without prejudice, to unsympathetic strangers, my entirely unjust and uncalled-for nickname.)

"If I invest the two thousand it means another hundred a year," he went on. "I ask you—what is five hundred a year?"

He gloomily excavated the Stilton, and ordered a glass of light port.

I agreed that five hundred a year didn't go far for two people, especially with tastes like theirs. They'd both hunted, and Bill liked polo, which he'd been able to afford while he was in the service. And Moyra liked clothes, being an ordinary normal girl, even if she was a darling.

"Of course, her old governor would put down something, I suppose," he went on after a while. "But I couldn't expect him to stump up more than I can put down myself. A thousand in all, say."

"What does Moyra think about it?" I inquired.

He got a bit red in the face.

"Look here, old man," he said, "I've been talking out of my turn. But I know you so well I'm pretty certain that if I asked her, she'd marry me with things as they are. But I haven't asked her, and I don't want to give you the impression that there's any understanding or whatever they call it between her and me. There isn't, and as far as I can see"—he relapsed into gloom—"there ain't likely to be. I'm beginning to think I was a fool to chuck the Army, except that it was a dead end for me. I wouldn't have got into the Staff Col-



lege in a hundred years. But I must say, Squash-face, the demand for my services has not caused me to post a policeman at the door to regulate the traffic."

And though I didn't say so, I doubted if any such demand was ever likely to be made on that excellent body of men as far as Bill was concerned. He was just like hundreds of others—a clean-living sportsman without a trade. And there's no money in being a clean-living sportsman. To ride straight at your fences, possess more than your fair ability with a gun, and be next door to first-class at all games with a ball is an excellent state of affairs: but from the financial point of view an ability to draw a picture of a good mixed-grill on the pavement wins in a canter.

The trouble was that he had no technical knowledge. A fairly senior subaltern when war broke out, he had finished up in command of a battalion with three gold stripes and various bits of ribbon to his credit. And technical knowledge which is of marketable value is not acquired in such a career. In fact, it was a thousand pities that he had chucked the service, where, with his private means, he could have gone on living the life that suited him in comparative comfort.

However, like many others during that period of false values which reached its climax in the summer of 1919, Bill Saunderson chucked in his hand. It was perfectly true that had he remained on it would have entailed his reversion to company commander for an indefinite period: it was perfectly true that seventy per cent. of his pals were dead. But it was the reaction principally that did it: that, and the prevalent and completely erroneous impression that it was easy to get a job. Any old thing, you know . . . Organizing. . . . A perfect whale at organization. . . .

## 6 THE DUCKING OF HERBERT POLTON

Heavens! the number of fellows who think they can organize. . . . And old Bill was one of the worst. He had no more idea of organization than I have of trimming a hat. Less—far less.

I said so to Moyra Jackson one day. The conversation had turned on Bill, as it frequently did if she and I were alone.

“Surely, Squash-face,” she said a little wistfully, “there must be some market for a man like him. When you see the awful horrors you do see, earning huge salaries, it seems ridiculous that Bill can’t get a job. He’s ever so much nicer than they are. And I know he could run things.”

I smiled: I couldn’t help it.

“What are you laughing for?” she demanded. “Look at that frightful ass, Julius Mortimer. All he does is to sit in an office and draw five thousand a year for running a cement works. Why shouldn’t Bill?”

“Largely, my child,” I murmured, “because Bill knows sweet dam’ all about cement. Are you aware that the frightful Julius has spent twenty-seven years of his life mastering the cement trade and everything connected with it in all its details? You can’t start in on a show at the top; you’ve got to begin at the bottom—as our Julius did. Pushing a truck on little rails. Bill could get a job at that to-morrow, provided he joined a trade-union and promised only to push one truck an hour.”

“You’re a fool, Squash-face,” she announced witheringly.

“Maybe, my dear,” I agreed. “But I do know something about business and its ways, and there is no good prophesying good things. Besides, I’m far too fond of you and Bill. There are two ways of getting

a job that is worth being called a job to-day: one is by ability and the other by influence. And influence is the method I'd choose if I had the choice."

And then, out of the blue, so to speak, came the scheme in British East Africa. I'd been away on business in Italy, and it was all cut and dried when I returned. As a favor I was let into the secret over a little dinner *à trois* one night.

"We're keeping it dark, Squash-face," said Bill. "No good yapping about these things all over the place. But it's a cinch, old son; a dead snip."

And on paper it certainly seemed to be a very sound proposition. It was coffee, as far as I remember, as the main plank, with various side issues, and it held out no widely extravagant promises. Twenty to thirty per cent.; perhaps even fifty, depending entirely on the amount of work put in by the owner. Also, of course, a bit of luck; there's bound to be the element of chance in farming. But the great thing was the life. First-class shooting; congenial society of the type who speak the language as the phrase goes; a wonderful climate. And the name of the company which was running the whole affair was the British East African Combine, Ltd.

It had Bill hooked fast and Moyra too.

"Think of it, Squash-face," he said. "Away from all these frightful people you hear eating around us; out in a new country with an open-air life. No bally old income-tax to worry one—not that it worries me much as it is, but that's a detail. And if I can get a thousand a year out of the place, why—"

He broke off and stared for a moment or two at Moyra. And she—well, dash it, there had been a time when I had dreamt a wild dream that it might be my



## 8 THE DUCKING OF HERBERT POLTON

luck to bring that look into her eyes. But it was only a dream and has nothing to do with this story. . . .

And so to British East went Bill with a young arsenal of rifles and guns. And as I said before, he wasn't exactly engaged to Moyra. I met her a few days after he'd sailed and she came in and lunched with me. She saw, I suppose, that I glanced at her left hand and she smiled a little wistfully.

"I almost threatened to buy one myself and wear it," she said. "But he wouldn't. He insisted that I should be absolutely free until he's made good."

"But you are," I said.

"Of course," she answered.

Which is really far more intelligible than it looks in black and white.

It was just as we were finishing lunch that she reverted to him again.

"You think it's all right, Squash-face, don't you?" she said. "It's a good show and all that?"

"As far as I can see it's quite all right," I answered. "Anyway, even if it isn't, the only expense involved is a return ticket."

"But he's had to pay two thousand already," she said. "There was such a rush, you see, to get ground. And there is only a limited amount available."

"The devil he has!" I exclaimed involuntarily. It hadn't struck me before that Bill would put up the money before seeing the place, and it altered the complexion of things very considerably. Of course, it might be all right; on the other hand it most certainly might not. But as it was done there was no good in voicing such fears to Moyra, and I told her that I was sure the scheme was perfectly sound. Even so, a tiny little pucker of anxiety was still remaining on her fore-



head when the coffee came. That first exclamation of mine had given me away.

"Don't worry, my dear," I repeated as I put her into a taxi. "Old Bill is going to come out on top. I'm off to the States to-morrow for two or three months, and when I come back I'll probably find you packing up to go out and join him."

It was four months, to be exact, before I returned, and a few days later I went down to spend a week-end with the Jacksons. Moyra herself had driven the car over to the station to meet me, and, our first greetings over, we plunged into the subject of Bill.

"Everything O.K., Squash-face," she said, and I heaved an inward sigh of relief. "He says it's a magnificent climate, and that he's going to make his fortune." Her eyes were very soft and shining. "I wrote him last mail to tell him that whether he likes it or not I am going out to join him."

"Good," I cried. "I'm so glad, Moyra. So, you see, I was right, though I don't mind telling you that, at the time, I was a bit uneasy. It was parting with his money before he'd seen the ground that frightened me."

We were driving up to the front door as I spoke, and I saw four men playing tennis on the hard court.

"It's a secret, Squash-face," she said as we pulled up, "about my going out to Bill."

"A secret it is," I answered. "Locked in my heart. But just at the moment I was thinking I'd got 'em again. Is that or is that not Herbert Polton wielding a tennis racket with the utmost inefficiency?"

"That's Mr. Polton. Why?"

"I'd no idea you knew him."

"He's a friend of Daddy's," she answered. "Don't you like him?"

"Mother always told me it was rude to criticize one's fellow-guests," I murmured. "But for your ears alone I will tell you my opinion of Mr. Polton. He is without exception the most vile human being that this or any other age has ever produced. Otherwise, of course, quite charming."

"I'm glad you like him so much," she answered. "Uncle William seems almost as fond of him as you are. Personally, I can't quite see it. What's the matter with the man?"

"My dear soul," I said, "you dine at eight. It is now six. There is time for a drink, and there is time for a bath, but there is not time to even touch the fringe of what is the matter with Herbert. I *can't* believe he's a friend of your father's."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Not exactly a friend; more a business acquaintance, I think."

And with that the matter dropped, though as I dressed for dinner I couldn't help wondering what had caused Herbert Polton to depart so far from his usual habits as to spend a week-end out of London and play tennis.

He loathed the country and everything connected with it, just as he detested all forms of exercise. There was only one driving force in his life and that was money, and the power that money confers. To that end he had devoted himself, and at the age of forty he was a millionaire many times over.

He was a small man, thin-lipped and clean-shaven, with a pair of penetrating blue eyes. And his eyes gave the clew to the whole man. They were cold and utterly merciless, even as Herbert Polton was cold and merciless. He fought his financial battles giving no quarter

and expecting none. And if in the process of amassing a few more hundred thousand pounds which he couldn't possibly spend, two or three smaller men were ruined, that was their fault, not his. The weakest to the wall, was his motto, and had been ever since he started in the City at the age of twenty.

"No one showed me any mercy," he had been heard to say. "So why should I show it to others? I fought my way to what I am now alone and unaided, and now that I'm here I don't propose to alter the rules."

One thing there was about him. He had many irons in the fire: he had interests in every corner of the world: but as far as the letter of the law was concerned he was scrupulously honest. Not that it could be accounted to him for virtue: it was simply rudimentary common sense. Only the fool goes outside the letter of the law, and however much Herbert Polton offended against the spirit of everything that is right and decent in life he was not a fool.

But it was not so much his ruthless methods that made him so universally detested; it was the man himself. He had a snarling, sneering way of talking, especially to a man who was down, that would have resulted in murder in more primitive times. There was the case, for instance, of one of his head clerks who had been with him for ten years. He was a married man with three children, and Polton sacked him for some trifling clerical error. And a week later the dismissed man stabbed him as he left his office. The poor devil got ten years for it, though Polton was hissed in court as he gave his evidence.

Personally, I had run across him once or twice on business matters. I had some interests adjoining his in Burma, and a year previously one or two small de-



tails had arisen which necessitated some discussion. His agent out there—a man named Condor, and a very decent fellow—had been in London, and it was to see him principally that I had been to Polton's palatial office in Trafalgar Square. A sick man was Condor—eaten out with fever. A lot of his work lay in the mangrove swamps, and it was a pestilential climate, he told me.

I found Polton in the hall sipping a glass of sherry when I went down, and we nodded to one another and exchanged a few remarks. And it was he who volunteered the information.

"Remember that agent of mine, Condor?" he said. "Got a cable yesterday to say that he was dead."

"I'm sorry about that," I remarked. "He looked very ill when I saw him in London. Fever, I suppose?"

"Yes—fever," he answered indifferently. "Three years is about the longest a white man can do there. Condor lasted four. I suppose you don't know of a good man who wants the job?"

"What job? Dying? No, I don't."

Little swine! I could have hit him under the jaw with comfort at that moment. I knew Condor had asked for a change, but it was specialized work which it took some time to pick up. So Polton had turned down the request.

"Do you stay here often?" he asked casually, though his eyes were fixed on me intently.

"Very often, when I'm in England," I answered a little surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh! nothing. I only wondered. With a charming girl like Miss Jackson it's not surprising."

His face registered what Polton called a smile.

"I'm afraid I fail to follow," I remarked coldly, and even as I spoke a sudden look came into his eyes. It was gone in a moment, but there was no mistaking its significance. Without even turning round I knew Moyra was coming across the hall towards us, and I also knew something else—the reason of Polton's presence in the house. The reptile was in love with Moyra; I knew it as certainly as if he had spoken his thoughts out loud. How it had started: where he had met her: what had been the beginning of the thing I didn't know. But the fact remained that Herbert Polton had fallen in love.

I went in to dinner a little thoughtfully. The thing, of course, was absurd. He was sitting next her, and was evidently going out of his way to be pleasant. And Polton being pleasant was not without its humor. The only point I couldn't quite get at was whether Moyra had any idea as to the state of affairs. A woman generally spots that particular ailment in a man on the very first symptom, but then Polton was hardly a man. He was an atrophied calculating machine.

I understood now the reason of his remarks to me before dinner. Evidently he'd been trying to pump me about Moyra, and I smiled inwardly. There was one thing at any rate in which ruthless business efficiency availed nothing, and that was in the matter of love. Bill, with his paltry two thousand, won in a canter there. And when we sat down to play bridge afterwards, the thought of the jolt awaiting Herbert if and when he laid his vast fortune and his unpleasing personality at Moyra's feet, was as balm to my soul.

And now for a moment it becomes necessary to digress. The digression is only apparent: in reality it has a close bearing on what is to follow. But I must

mention briefly the unfortunate contretemps that took place that night over the card-table.

Fate—in the shape of cutting—decreed that Mr. Jackson and I played against Polton and Uncle William, whom I will now introduce. Uncle William was and is a bachelor, with, I regret to state, a penchant for vintage port. And that night at dinner he had consumed four glasses. He was an Anglo-Indian of fiery temperament and considerable wealth, and he suffered from one great delusion. He thought he was a first-class bridge player.

Now, he wasn't. Honesty compels me to state that at his brightest and best he was distinctly C 3. And after four glasses of the old and bold he was about Z 5. But the delusion remained.

On the contrary, Herbert Polton was first-class. He combined a wonderful memory and a clear brain with an almost uncanny card sense. In fact, he was as good a player as any one is ever likely to meet.

The trouble occurred in the third hand that was played. Polton was dummy and Uncle William had gone four no trumps, which I had doubled. And Uncle William got the lead in the wrong hand and went down three when he ought to have made his contract.

I will not linger over the subsequent scene. There are men with whom it is a pleasure to play cards, and there are others. Herbert Polton was one of the others. It was not, as he pointed out after a few preliminary remarks, that he objected to the loss of money, but that he considered that there should be some standard of proficiency which must be attained before people were allowed to play. To which Uncle William replied that if the same idea was extended to lawn tennis and



manners he would be the first to agree with it. And with that the subject dropped—save in Uncle William's mind. It lingered there until in the fullness of time—But of that in its proper place.

It was about a month later that Bill walked into my rooms and threw himself into a chair. I was so surprised that for a moment or two I stared at him without speaking, and then I realized that things were wrong. His eyes were tired, and there were lines on his face that had never been there before.

"I suppose you know a good many silly fools, Squash-face?" he said at length. "Well, I'm the king of that castle."

"What's up, old man?" I asked, pushing over the cigarettes.

"Merely that the British East African Combine, Ltd., is the most almighty swindle," he answered wearily.

"But Moyra told me you were making your fortune."

He laughed a little bitterly.

"There was no good making her unhappy. It was a lie, of course; though when I wrote that letter I had something else in my mind which might have turned up trumps. It didn't, and that's that. And then she wrote and told me she was coming out to join me. That's why I've come back; to stop her. By God, old man," he burst out savagely, "it's a foul ramp, that scheme! I've lost my two thousand, but there were one or two others—"

He broke off and drummed with his fingers on the table.

"There was a boy there—quite a youngster. Married

—and his wife was with him. Lost every penny. Nice boy, too, but not the stuff to stand that. Got on the drink, and blew out her brains and then his own.”

“Can’t you run them in, Bill?” I said after a moment.

“I don’t know. Perhaps. But it’s diabolically clever, Squash-face—that agreement of theirs. Everything they said in it is right up to a point. And that’s where the crux comes in. It’s a question of degree. All they have done is to unload—I won’t say worthless ground, but next door to it—on fellows at about a thousand per cent. over its proper price. Everything was to depend on the amount of work put in by the buyer. Naturally, the same may be said of any farming prospect. And if I’d bought that ground for say two hundred pounds, which is about what it was worth, and been able to put the remaining eighteen hundred into improvement and irrigation and that sort of thing, it might have proved a reasonable show. But there’s no law against selling a thing at an inflated price, if you can get fools to buy.”

We went into it that morning from all angles, and at length I had to agree with him. It was just one of those rotten swindles, which legally are not swindles. The ground sold conformed to what was claimed for it, and if people were prepared to pay ten times more than it was worth it was their worry.

“You haven’t seen Moyra yet?” I asked him.

Bill stared out of the window with his back to me.

“No, I only landed this morning. Squash-face, I’m going to ask you to do something for me. Things”—he hesitated a moment—“things were pretty well fixed up, you’ll understand. And, of course, this has altered everything. Well, I’ve been figuring it out on the way

home. It's not fair to keep her hanging around while I go on qualifying for a mental home. So I'm just going to fade away out of the country. Canada—or somewhere. And I want you to tell her how things stand. Make her see it, old man; make her understand that it's not—it's not— Oh, hang it—you understand."

"I understand perfectly, Bill," I answered. "When are you going?"

"As soon as I can. I'm going round to interview the British East African Combine, Ltd., this afternoon, and after that the sooner I'm out of London the better."

"Right," I said. "Dine with me to-night anyway; Savoy grill."

He nodded, and picked up his hat.

"You'll make it clear to her, won't you, old son?"

"Confound you, Bill—of course I will! You darned quixotic idiot! Now, for the love of Mike, clear out. I've got work to do."

And it was work, too. What on earth was wrong with the telephone system that day I don't know. But it took me the best part of an hour to get through to Moyra, and then she could hardly hear what I said.

"Savor grill," I bellowed. "Stop with Aunt Jane. Eight o'clock."

"But how is Bill?" she said for the twentieth time.

"Wait and see," I retorted brilliantly.

And I'd replaced the receiver before she had a chance of being rude.

He halted a bit in his tracks, did Bill, when he saw Moyra with me that evening. And Moyra made a little sound in her throat that was half a sigh and half a sob, though she was pleased to be severely aloof when he came up.



"You old blighter, Squash-face," he said, and his voice shook a bit. "Moyra—my dear—"

"Look here, young fellah," she said, "you're for it. What in the name of fortune do you mean by sneaking into England and trying to sneak out again without letting me know? And if the good-looking man on my right had not had the sense to telephone me you might have succeeded."

"But don't you see, my dear," he said, helplessly, "it's put the lid on the whole show."

And quite suddenly she dropped her bantering tone.

"Dear boy," she said very low. "Dear, dear boy. Do you really think that it's made any difference at all?"

"At this juncture," I murmured, "utilizing to the full that tact which has made me famous throughout three continents, I will go and ascertain if the oysters are prepared for the sacrifice."

"Ass!" said Bill, but ten minutes later when I returned, it struck me that the difference was certainly not large.

Once again we went over it all. He'd been down to see the people in the office, but he'd got very little change out of them. They were merely the agents, and if he chose to take legal proceedings—well, they'd regret it, but there was nothing to prevent him. Of course, he would have to prove that there was a definite misstatement of fact, and the law was an expensive amusement.

"An oily little swine of a Jew bird, Squash-face," he said, and he smiled happily. "With a lisp: you know. I pulled him out of his chair, and I slogged him over the head with a Post Office directory. And then I said to him that I was merely an agent, but

that if he chose to take legal proceedings for assault and battery there was nothing to prevent him. I felt better after that."

And then his face became weary again, and he stared at Moyra a bit hopelessly.

"Lordy, Lordy—what a fool I've been!" he said for the tenth time.

But for the moment she seemed to be engrossed in thought.

"Give me a cigarette, Bill," she said at length. "I'm hatching out an idea. I'm not going to tell you what it is—" She broke off abruptly. "Look here, you two; let's lunch here to-morrow and I'll tell you if the old egg is good or bad."

And not another word would she say, though later on Bill, when he took her back to Aunt Jane, tried to get it out of her.

"I'll tell you to-morrow, Bill," was all she answered, and with that he had to be content.

"What can the dear Kid do?" he said to me pessimistically as we waited for her the next day. "She doesn't understand. She— Good Lord! old man, she's pulled something off. Look at her face!"

Sure enough the news was good. Moyra was coming towards us smiling triumphantly.

"Is fifteen hundred a year and first-class prospects any good, my lad? For that's what this child has got for you."

"It is true," murmured Bill, "that yonder man looks like a bad dream, but I have an idea that I'm awake. Elucidate your statement, my angel."

I think I had a premonition of what was coming: she'd been to Herbert Polton. And as she went over the interview, and told us what had happened, I lis-

tened half mechanically. Bill was getting keener and keener as she talked: the weariness had left his face.

"It's in Burma, Bill," she said. "The manager out there has just died. Fifteen hundred a year to start with, and he wants to see you this afternoon. And Squash-face said he was a sweep"—she turned on me with scorn.

She went on talking, and a feeling of helplessness came over me.

"What job? Dying."

My remark to Polton came back to me, but what could I do? As clearly as if it were written in a book I saw the whole scheme, but of proof I had none. Polton, realizing Bill was his rival, had adopted the simple expedient of offering him a job at the other end of the earth to get rid of him. The fact that by so doing he earned the gratitude of Moyra and ran a good chance of killing Bill was entirely typical of Herbert Polton. But the utter futility of saying so to them was apparent.

You don't deter a virile man from accepting a good job because the locality is unhealthy: you don't tell your best friend that you are convinced that the only reason he's got a job is that the man who has given it to him is in love with his girl and wants him out of the way. At least not without proof, and my proof consisted of a fleeting look on Polton's face.

"You've got some ground out there, haven't you, Squash-face?"

Bill was speaking, and I came out of my reverie.

"I have," I answered. And suddenly an idea came to me. "I'll come round and see Polton with you this afternoon, Bill. I know him."

"Splendid," said Bill. "I wish you would."



And so half an hour later we strolled along the Strand towards Polton's office. Moyra was doing a *matinée* and we had arranged to foregather for tea at Rumpelmaver's.

"Look here, Bill," I said, "I want you particularly to remember one thing. Tell Polton that you propose to marry Moyra and take her out with you."

He looked at me doubtfully.

"But what about the climate?"

"Never mind the climate. You tell Polton that. I have a reason."

"You're dashed mysterious about this business, old man," he said a little irritably. "It seems to me a wonderfully good job, and a very sporting effort on the part of this man Polton, considering he's never seen me."

I took a chance.

"He's seen Moyra," I said.

Bill turned white.

"What the devil do you mean?" he said quietly.

"Exactly what I say," I answered. "Tell him what I told you."

To say that Herbert Polton was pleased to see me would be to exaggerate. I introduced Bill, and for a few minutes they discussed the job. Bill was staring at him pretty closely as they talked, and I could see Polton wasn't quite at his ease.

"Of course, it's not a healthy locality," he said.

"Three years I think you gave it, for any ordinary man," I remarked.

Polton shrugged his shoulders.

"Saunderson looks pretty well salted," he said. "Of course, if you don't care about the job—don't take it. I'm merely doing it to oblige Miss Jackson."

"Who will come out there with me," put in Bill quietly.

Polton started perceptibly.

"Impossible," he said decisively. "The climate is out of the question for a white woman. You would have no right whatever to take her out there. In fact, as a friend of her father's, I should feel compelled to withdraw my offer unless you give me your word of honor that you won't do anything of the sort."

"The climate is quite all right for six months of the year," I remarked. "And for the remaining six, with the munificent salary you offer, Mr. Polton, I've no doubt Saunderson will be able to make satisfactory arrangements for his wife's health."

I think it was then that Polton realized that I, at any rate, had guessed his game.

"May I ask if it is you who are engaging Saunderson, or I?" he asked venomously.

"And may I ask," I said, "why—having offered a job to a completely unknown man—you should be so concerned about his domestic affairs?"

The gloves were off, and no one knew it better than Bill.

"Have you ever read the story of Uriah the Hittite, Mr. Polton?" I said.

"Get out of my office!" he snarled.

"You swab!" said Bill slowly. "You filthy swab." He reached across the desk, as if he were going to hit Polton, and in doing so knocked over a pile of papers. And then he stood very still staring at a book which had been hidden until now.

"Get out of my office—both of you!" gibbered Polton, "or I'll send for the police."

"What have you to do with the British East African Combine?" thundered Bill.

"Get out of my office!" shouted Polton, and then Bill's great hands came down on him and he squealed like a cornered rat.

"You reptile!" said Bill. "Now I remember. A boy who blew out his wife's brains and then his own told me that Polton was the name of the man who had swindled him."

"Let me go, curse you!" screamed Polton, but Bill took no notice.

"I half stunned your wretched agent this morning, Polton," he said thoughtfully, "and I'm wondering what I'll do with you."

And then suddenly he grinned.

"Open the door, Squash-face: and bring my hat."

Half pushing, half carrying, he rushed Herbert Polton down the stairs, and across the road. An unholy joy was on Bill's face, and he paid not the slightest attention to the staring bystanders. In fact it was all over in a flash. For it can't have been more than half a minute from the time Polton left his office to the moment when, with a resounding splash, he entered the fountain in Trafalgar Square.

"You can run me in if you like, you excrescence," remarked Bill dispassionately, as Polton, spluttering horribly, got his head above water. "But if you do I shall tell all I know about your swindling combine."

And then arrived the fullness of time of which I have spoken. What marvelous dispensation of Providence had caused Uncle William to select that psychological moment to pass on his way to Whitehall I know not. But it happened.



Full of port and the club's '64 brandy he surveyed the dripping Polton in a kind of ecstasy. Then he threw him a penny.

"A very creditable performance," he boomed. "Much better than your tennis or your bridge."

He turned to Bill.

"Why, good Lord! it's young Bill Saunderson. I'll bail you out, my boy, if there's any trouble."

But there wasn't. Herbert Polton darted into a cab and disappeared, so the police contented themselves with taking Bill's name and address for reference.

"Magnificent!" cried Uncle William. "Sublime! I wouldn't have missed it for ten thousand pounds. Did you come back specially from Africa to do it?"

"More or less," grinned Bill. "He swindled me out of all my money."

"Did he, indeed?" said Uncle William. "Then what are you going to do about that niece of mine? Can't marry her without money: must marry her if you've ducked Polton. We couldn't let you out of the family. Come and dine at my club, my boy. Wonderful port. We'll talk things over. To-night, at eight. And tell Moyra to order her trousseau."

He departed booming joyfully towards Whitehall, leaving Bill partially dazed.

"What's he mean, Squash-face?"

"Just what he says, old man," I answered. "And now I think I'll leave you to break the news to Moyra and push off. I shall be very busy this afternoon."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see every human being I know in the City and tell 'em what's happened. So long, Bill."

## COINCIDENCE

I MET her first in Monte Carlo. She called herself the Comtesse de Gramont, though who the Comte de Gramont was or had been was a matter which was never satisfactorily elucidated. Certainly if he existed he never appeared on the scene: her invariable companion was a fierce-looking maiden lady of doubtful age who rejoiced in the name of Miss Muggleston. And with Miss Muggleston we are not concerned. Beyond stating that she was addicted to Patience and invariably retired early to bed, Miss Muggleston may be dismissed from these pages, with the same completeness as she was, on occasion, dismissed from the presence of her employer.

To say that Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, was beautiful would be banal. There are women whom it is impossible to dismiss as pretty or plain, ugly or beautiful—to place in a sort of well-defined class. She was beautiful undoubtedly—one of the most lovely women I have ever seen, if not *the* most lovely—but that was only the beginning, the least part of her. It is a big claim to make, but I veritably believe that even if she had been as ugly as sin her devilish attraction would have been in no way impaired. Her figure was marvelous: her clothes unique, and yet exactly suitable for her. Not another woman in a thousand could have worn them: on the Comtesse nothing else was possible. And, finally, she possessed a charm of manner, and a gift of conversation which alone would have been suf-

ficient to keep a dozen men at her side had she wished for them. She did not wish for them—apparently: wherefore the dozen who would have liked to be there grew to a hundred.

I was talking to Tony Graham in the Sporting Club the first time I saw her—and what Tony does not know about cosmopolitan European society is small. There was a general rustling and craning of heads as she entered, and it takes something to cause that in a place where some of the most beautiful women in the world are to be seen nightly. She was dressed in plain black, and a single diamond ornament blazed on her breast. But it was her carriage that made me look at her particularly, and ask the question that a score of other people asked simultaneously. It was completely natural, and yet utterly regal: the walk of a woman who is absolutely sure of herself and supremely indifferent to what any onlookers may choose to say. In fact, as far as she was concerned, there were no onlookers, though there was no trace of conscious superiority on her face. In short, she accomplished one of the hardest things in the world to do better than I had ever seen it done before.

“Who is she, Tony?” I asked when she had passed.

He chuckled and lit a cigarette.

“Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, my son,” he answered, “is her name, and that is the only positive fact that I can tell you about her. And that is only positive in that it is the name to which she answers, and under which her suite at the ‘Paris’ is registered. There are people who say that she is a left-handed descendant of the Hapsburgs: there are others who affirm that since her father left the Milan in Paris the cooking has deteriorated. You now perceive at her side young



Dorset, who doesn't care a damn who she is, as long as he may have the privilege of losing more money on her behalf out of his already hopelessly encumbered estate. Women, as you may guess, do not love her: save for a dangerous-looking English woman who is doubtless by this time safely in bed, you'll never see one talking to her. Men, on the contrary, talk to her just as much as she will let them—which varies considerably and very capriciously. She fails, as far as I can see, to conform to the generally accepted rules of her type. For instance, there was a most delightful fellow here last year—Indian Cavalry, on leave. I forget his name—but if you're curious you'll see it up in the cemetery."

"What's that?" I cried, sitting up suddenly. Once Tony gets started, no one who knows him listens very much: you know he'll go on quite happily.

"Cemetery, I said," he continued. "He blew out his brains. Lived in her pocket for three weeks, and then killed himself. People said it was losses at the tables; but the boy was hardly ever in here. And that was what I was getting at: she doesn't conform to type. I made inquiries afterwards, and the poor fellow hadn't got a bean beside his pay. And two years of that wouldn't have kept her in face-powder. If she stuck to old Guggenheimer, the Berlin banker, and one or two others of that kidney, I could understand it: if she even ostensibly stuck to them when they were round about it would be easy to fathom. But she doesn't. If the spirit takes her, she'll tell them to go to the devil, and take up some man right under their noses. And they always come back, though to do her justice, I don't think she would mind if they didn't. In fact, old man, a very remarkable woman."

"You know her, I suppose," I said perfunctorily: my interest in the Comtesse was exhausted.

"Oh! yes; I know her," he answered. "That is to say, I have talked to her occasionally, and sat next her at dinner on one occasion. And, as I said before, she is not *comme les autres*. Far from it."

For a moment or two Tony Graham's face grew serious.

"If I had a son or a dear friend," he went on quietly, "my prayer would be that he never came under her influence. You and I are old stagers, Bill, but a youngster—" He stared in front of him, frowning. "That boy in the Indian Cavalry wasn't the first—not by any means. There was an Englishman at Biarritz some time ago, and a young American in Rome. And others."

I gently touched his foot.

"Look out, Tony: she's coming over here."

He glanced up and rose to his feet as the Comtesse passed. She held out her hand with a gracious smile, and Tony brushed it with his lips.

"My luck," she murmured, "is atrocious. Be a saint, my friend, and order me an orangeade."

He gave the order, and then with a faint smile he introduced me.

"I was just telling Lord Telford that your luck is usually very good," he remarked, and for a while we talked on systems and their utter futility. Most certainly Tony was right over one thing: she was not *comme les autres*. As well as being the best-dressed, she was easily the most *distinguée* woman in the room, and it was difficult to believe that some of the things he had told me were not exaggerated. Round such a woman stories would be bound to gather, and Tony



was the most chronic gossipier of my acquaintance. And yet for him he had been singularly serious. . . .

Fate decrees these things, I suppose. First my idle curiosity, then her wish for something to drink, and then young Peter Carruthers suddenly arriving. Is it all blind chance, or is there an ordered scheme of things leading to some definite end? If she hadn't wanted an orangeade, the probability is they would never have met, and if they hadn't . . . Lord! but it's a funny world.

"Hullo! Sir," I heard a cheery voice at my elbow. "What are you doing in these gilded haunts of vice?"

"It's you, is it, Peter," I said, looking up. "I thought you were skiing down avalanches at Wengen or somewhere."

"Just come from there," he answered. "Had the most glorious sport."

And as he spoke, his eyes were fixed on the Comtesse, who was talking to Tony Graham.

"I say, Sir," he whispered, "you might introduce me, would you?"

Into my mind flashed Tony's remark, but it was impossible to refuse, more especially as at that moment she turned and spoke to me. She acknowledged the introduction with a charming smile, and waved him to a seat beside her, into which Peter dropped with alacrity.

He was an extraordinarily good-looking boy—the very best type of an Englishman—and, that evening, with his face tanned by the Swiss mountain air he was just about as perfect a specimen of young manhood as one could well imagine. His father was one of my oldest friends, and young Peter himself I had known since he was born. Six months before he had been



married to a girl I had never seen, and, being abroad at the time, I had not been able to attend the ceremony. But I gathered from what his father had written me that she was charming, and just the right sort for Peter.

At the moment, however, she seemed a little out of the picture, which consisted exclusively of the Comtesse. Apparently she had long wanted to try winter sports, and, short of trying them, a detailed description of their joys and difficulties by Peter was the next best substitute. She got it—for ten minutes: then she rose. To-morrow he must tell her more. Assuredly he would: there was nothing which would give him greater pleasure. And was it my imagination, or was there a strange gleam of triumph in the eyes of Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, as she left us?

"What a perfectly stunning soul," said Peter ecstatically after she had disappeared. "Who is she?"

"A collector of specimens," answered Tony Graham quietly. "You'd better be careful, young feller: too much of that lady ain't good for the soul."

"How's your wife, Peter?" I asked, as I saw him flush a little angrily. "It was a great disappointment for me that I couldn't attend your wedding."

"She's fine, Sir, thank you. I was forgetting you'd never seen her. She went back a week ago from Wengen—sister getting married or something—so I thought I'd barge down here for a day or two on the way home."

"When are you going back?" I asked.

"Oh! shortly," he answered vaguely. "Depends rather. Well, I think I'll push along over to the old pub. I'm feeling a bit weary. Good-night, Sir. See you to-morrow."

With a nod to Tony Graham he was gone, and for a while we sat in silence. And it wasn't until we parted for the night that the subject was alluded to again.

"Get that boy away to-morrow, Bill, if you can," he said. "By the milk train at crack o' dawn, if there is such a thing."

He laughed a little mirthlessly.

"There's going to be trouble if you don't. The poor devil is hooked already."

"Rot, Tony," I said. "You've got the damn woman on the brain. The boy is only just married."

But it wasn't rot, and I knew he was right even as I was answering him. Young Peter was hooked, and he didn't even struggle. He seemed to be hypnotized by her during the next two or three days: it was pitiful to watch. He was for ever with her—lunching, walking, dining; and at length I made up my mind to have a talk to him. After all, though he was twenty-nine, he was almost like a son to me: and though it's ticklish work butting in on things of that sort, it struck me pretty forcibly that it was just a plain duty.

I cornered him one morning just before lunch at Ciro's. I guessed he was waiting for her, so the time was not propitious. But as it was the first time I'd seen him alone for two days the opportunity had to be taken.

"Look here, young fellow," I said, "how much longer is Monte Carlo going to have the pleasure of your company?"

He got a bit red in the face.

"Oh, I dunno, Sir," he stammered. "Haven't really thought about it."

"Then it's about time you began," I said. And then I let him have it straight from the shoulder. "It's not

playing the game, Peter, for you to go on monkeying round with the Comtesse de Gramont, while the girl you've just married is waiting for you in England. Cut it out, boy; the woman is rotten to the core."

It wasn't till then I realized how far it had gone. He drew himself up very straight and stared at me.

"Only the fact, Lord Telford, that you are considerably older than myself and a friend of my father's prevents me hitting you in the face. So I will content myself with requesting you to go to the devil." And then he added, with a sort of suppressed fury: "How dare you say such a thing of Paula?"

Well, that didn't help much—distinctly otherwise, in fact. I talked it over with Tony Graham, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"'A rag and a bone,' Bill," he said. "The old story. And you might as well talk to her about it as to that palm tree. She's got him—she's going to keep him, and when she's finished with him she'll throw him away like the core of an eaten apple."

"I think I'll write to his father," I said. "Not that old Jim can do any good, but he'd take it hard if he thought I hadn't let him know."

So I wrote to Jim Carruthers that night, and four days later he arrived in Monte Carlo. He came straight up to my room, and I told him all the facts of the case as far as I knew them.

"It's a bad case, Jim," I said, "a real bad case. She's got him absolutely under her thumb. He's infatuated! He's mad about the woman. I've done what I can, but he cuts me now when he meets me. You see I told him what I thought of her. Honestly, it's not the boy's fault: she's enough to turn any man's head."

"I must talk to him," he said, heavily. "Get him



home somehow. Poor little Ruth suspects something already. You see he hasn't written her—not a line. And when she heard I was coming here, she wanted to come too. Had the devil of a job preventing her." Suddenly he shook his fist across the sunlit bay. "Curse this foul woman."

A couple of hours later I met him on the terrace. He seemed to have aged, and I guessed what had happened.

"Useless, Bill," he almost groaned. "Absolutely useless. Told me frankly that he'd made a ghastly mistake in marrying Ruth, and that though he was frightfully sorry for her he wasn't going to make the still more ghastly mistake of going on living with her. That this cursed woman was the only woman in the world for whom he could ever care: that she was his soul mate and a lot of other truck of that sort."

He stared out to sea and his face was gray.

"Oh, God, Bill," he muttered, "that Peter should do this thing. For he'll take it hard—my boy will, when she's finished with him and he finds her out for what she really is."

"But is he intending to marry her, Jim?" I asked. "Divorce and that sort of thing. Is that his idea?"

"It's his idea right enough," he said bitterly. "But whether it is hers or not is a very different matter."

And from what I knew of the lady's past history, it certainly wasn't, though I didn't tell him so.

Three days after Jim arrived, Peter left and with him the Comtesse de Gramont. They had given no indication that they were going, and Peter had not even said good-by to his father. In fact, it was several hours before we found out that they had left in the morning for Taormina, in Sicily.

Old Jim was distracted. He felt, I think, that while he was in the same place with them he could more or less keep an eye on the situation, which was absurd but understandable. And his first thought was to follow immediately. It was Tony Graham who dissuaded him.

"What's the use?" he pointed out. "You can *do* nothing, my dear fellow. And it's only torturing yourself unnecessarily. Take it from me, Carruthers, there is only one cure in a case of this sort—time. When it's over, then will be the moment to try and mend things up a bit. And not at once even then. The boy will be like a wounded animal for a while: he'll want to hide himself."

And so the three of us waited on. What exactly Jim wrote to the girl I don't know, but if she'd suspected before she must have known by this time. And then suddenly one morning I saw it in the "Continental Daily Mail." It danced in front of me, that stunning, paralyzing paragraph, so that for a while I could scarcely read it:—

"SHOCKING TRAGEDY AT TAORMINA.

"A dreadful tragedy took place last night in the celebrated ruins of the Greek Theater at Taormina. It seems that a young Englishman had climbed to the top of the ruins, which, on the western side are some thirty to forty feet high, and in the darkness must have missed his footing. The drop here is sheer, and the unfortunate gentleman was killed instantly by the fall. He has been identified as Mr. Peter Carruthers."

I thought Jim would go mad when at last he'd grasped the fact. He idolized Peter, who was an only child as well as an only son. Nothing would persuade him that it was an accident; it was merely the influence of that vile woman. She'd driven his boy off his head, and in a moment of insanity he'd killed himself. And so thought Tony Graham and I, though we didn't say so.

The one thing to do was to prevent Jim making a fool of himself, and stirring up some scandal, which would make matters worse. Nothing he could do would bring the poor lad back to life again; nothing he could do would punish the woman as she deserved. It was difficult to make him see it: the poor old chap was beside himself with grief. I think if Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, had crossed his path, he'd have strangled her with his own hands—Jim who would as soon have thought of lifting his hand to a woman as he would of kicking a sick child.

But she didn't. When we arrived—he and I—at Taormina, she had gone. And Jim was calmer by then. He looked twenty years older, but he did all the necessary formalities with a stiff upper lip.

They were sympathetic, were the authorities. "A terrible thing for the signor: incredible how it could have happened. But undoubtedly an accident—oh, yes, undoubtedly. In the dim light. A false step. . . . Terrible. . . ."

But one thing Jim and I did do before he took his dead back to England: we climbed to the spot where it had happened. It was a large flat bricked floor some five yards by five yards, close by the custodian's house. There were two of these spaces, built above the old



stage, and—well, it settled things. None could have accidentally walked off the edge, any more than one accidentally walks off a railway platform on to the line.

For a while Jim stood there looking with unseeing eyes across the town towards snow-capped Etna. And then he turned to me.

"Some day, Bill," he said, "my boy will be avenged. I don't know when, and I don't know how, but it will come."

Without another word he walked back to his hotel, and shut himself in his room. And the next day he left.

Three years later I came back from the East. A wanderer from birth, I was homesick for England, but my brother, who was commanding one of the battalions in Malta, persuaded me to break my journey there. The tragedy of young Peter Carruthers had faded from my mind, and it wasn't until I was dressing for dinner and saw through my window the snow peak of Etna, rising ghost-like from the sea away to the north, that it came back to me. Where, I wondered, was the Comtesse de Gramont? Had there been others who followed Peter's example, and that of the man in the Indian Cavalry? What of old Jim, and the girl whom Peter had married?

And then at mess came the amazing answer to at least one of those questions. The Second-in-command had just returned from eight days' leave at Taormina, where his mother was spending a few weeks. It was he who told me the Comtesse de Gramont was there too. Damned attractive woman: all the old dears in the hotel buzzing like a swarm of bees whenever they saw her. A trifle chutney, he opined, but extraordi-

narily good-looking. Did I know her by any chance? Yes—slightly, and the conversation dropped.

What a staggering coincidence, I thought, as I undressed that night. And then and there I decided to alter my plans. Instead of going on to Marseilles, I too would go and stop at Taormina. There was a boat next day to Syracuse, and when I announced my intention of catching it, a twinkle appeared in the eyes of the Second-in-command.

"A charming place," he said, thoughtfully. "You know it—er—slightly, don't you, Sir?"

"Wrong, Johnny," I answered. "Quite wrong. But have it your own way."

And so I met the Comtesse de Gramont for the second time. She was dining at a table not far from mine, and she had her back to me. With her was a much younger woman—quite pretty, but simply dressed. One of those people whom you dismiss as a nonentity, but quite a nice little thing in her way. A new companion I decided: presumably Miss Muggleston had been replaced.

And now as I went through my solitary dinner, I began to wonder what had really brought me there. Idle curiosity—the coincidence—what? And if she recognized me, as she probably would, what was I to say? How should I meet her?

To be friendly with her was out of the question—and yet one must preserve the conventionalities. Peter's death had been accepted as an accident: on the surface the matter was closed. To reopen it would be a stupid solecism, and could lead to nothing except unpleasantness. Whatever one may think, the world demands a certain amount of acting. . . .

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Comtesse



push back her chair, and as she passed my table I became engrossed in the dangerous task of eating spaghetti in a manner suitable for public view. And so, somewhat naturally, she failed to recognize me, which was what I wanted. I was still doubtful what line to take when we did meet.

In fact, the more I thought of it the more did it seem to me that my sudden whim to come there had been a foolish one. I decided I would catch the Rome express the next day, and until then keep out of her way.

And so after dinner I lit a cigar and went for a stroll. Almost unconsciously my steps led me through the narrow paved main street towards the ruins of the Greek theater. The last time I had walked that street had been with Jim, and my mind was full of him as I climbed the steps towards the ruins. Poor old chap! Broken up, I supposed, completely. And that dear wife of his! God! it's a cruel thing to lose your all as they had done. And in such a rotten way, too.

I sat down on a big smooth boulder to finish my cigar. Below me the lights of Giardini twinkled round the shore of the bay; in front—on the top of Etna—a faint glow of pink showed up against the night. From the village close by came the sounds of a flute and a woman singing, and I wondered if it was just such a night three years ago when Peter had thrown in his hand. Black and sharp-cut above me to my left I could see the theater. They liked tragedy—the Greeks: but had they ever staged a grimmer one in their theater when it stood, than that which had been enacted in its ruins?

And even as the thought flashed through my mind it happened. To this day it staggers me as I think of it.



There was one terrified agonizing scream, and something fell from the top of the theater. Then a dull crash—not twenty yards from where I sat—and silence.

For a moment I sat stupefied; then I got up and rushed to where the thing lay. I could see it sprawling on the white stone—motionless. It was a woman, and before I got to her some premonition told me the truth.

"I don't know when, I don't know how, but it will come."

It had. Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, lay dead at my feet on the same spot that Peter Carruthers had died three years before.

A terrified girl appeared from inside the theater suddenly. I looked at her, and it was the companion I had noticed at dinner.

"Mon Dieu! Monsieur," she cried, "what has happened? Is she dead?"

"She is dead," I answered gravely. "You are her companion?"

"Yes," she nodded. "But how terrible. The Comtesse was standing on the edge watching the view, and suddenly she seemed to sway. And before I could get to her she gave a dreadful scream and disappeared."

I pacified her as best I could, and told her I would inform the police.

"Your evidence will be wanted," I said, "but don't worry yourself. It will only be a formality."

It was only a formality, but during the next few days I wondered mightily. I am not a superstitious man, and yet there are more things in heaven and in earth. . . . The old tag. Had some strange power come out of the darkness to force that woman to her doom? Did

she see, as she stood there, Peter beckoning to her, or standing at her side compelling her to do even as she had made him do?

Jim had no doubts upon it.

"I told you so," he said gravely, as I sat with him after dinner a fortnight later, at his place in Sussex. "I don't profess to account for it, but it must be more than a mere coincidence, Bill. The same place exactly: the same death. Remorse, perhaps; if such a devil as that woman was could feel such a thing. But nothing will ever convince me that some power outside our ken was not at work to cause her death."

For a while we talked, and it seemed to me he must be right. He'd aged dreadfully had the dear fellow: things didn't seem worth while any longer. In fact, all he and his wife had left now was Ruth—Peter's widow—and that wasn't the same thing.

"She's a sweet girl, Bill," he said. "You've never seen her, but she's coming home to-morrow."

"Has she been living here ever since it happened?" I asked.

"No," he answered, "she's been away for a year. She wanted to travel, and both Nell and I thought it would do her good. Of course, we'll lose her some day—we can't be selfish, but we've made her feel that this is her home as long as she wants it."

"And has she any idea of what happened?" I asked.

"Good heavens! No, old man," he cried emphatically. "She thinks it was just an accident. Why, I don't suppose that Ruth has any idea that women like that woman even exist. She's very far from being one of these modern products. I wouldn't have her know the truth for the world. She was suspicious at first, of course, but I succeeded in setting her mind

at rest. A dear girl: I'm glad you're going to meet her at last."

And the next day I met Ruth Carruthers—but it wasn't a case of at last. She came across the garden towards me, and for a space we stared at one another in silence. For Ruth Carruthers was the terrified girl who had rushed out from the ruins of the old Greek theater in Taormina, just after the Comtesse de Gramont had fallen from the top: Ruth Carruthers was the companion who had replaced Miss Muggleston.

"It was stupid of me not to realize," she said steadily, "that the Lord Telford of Taormina was the Bill Telford Dad so often talks about. But it didn't occur to me somehow."

"Good God! my dear child," I cried, "explain. I'm completely dazed."

"And yet it's very easy," she said quietly. "But I will explain, and when you've heard my explanation, you must take what steps you think fit. You were with Dad, weren't you, when Peter killed himself?"

I started slightly, but said nothing.

"Of course, those two old dears think that I thought it was an accident. They didn't know that I had a letter from Peter, written the day he did it. I burnt that letter months afterwards, but I know it by heart. It was a ghastly letter—smudged and incoherent. It was a terrible letter written from the depths of Peter's tortured soul. He admitted everything to me: he hid nothing, he pleaded no excuse. He merely said that a power stronger than his own had taken possession of him, and that unless she would marry him he was going to kill himself. And then there was something about my divorcing him."

She stared across the garden towards the old house.



"I was furious at first," she went on. "It seemed so despicably weak. To sacrifice all this for what seemed to me to be merely a passing passion. And I was hurt—bitterly hurt. I dried up—something inside me was killed. And then as time went on the anger left me; the pitiful side of that letter grew uppermost in my mind. And with pity for him there grew a deadly, over-mastering hatred for that woman. At first it was purposeless. I just hated her. And then little by little it crystallized into the determination to make her suffer, even as she had made Peter. How I was to do it I hadn't an idea, but sooner or later I was going to do it.

"It was about this time last year that the opportunity came. The Comtesse de Gramont was advertising for a companion. She was in London, and it seemed to me that here was my chance. I answered the advertisement in person, and my luck held. She engaged me under another name, and I told them here that I was going to travel."

Once again she paused, and I didn't interrupt her.

"I don't think, Lord Telford," she went on after a while, "that it would be possible for me to explain to you the manner of woman she was. Before men she kept up a certain restraint: before me she kept up none. It was partly my fault, because, at times, I used to apparently sympathize with her in order to be quite, quite sure. She was the cruellist devil that the mind of a novelist has ever conceived of, in fact, if you put that woman's character as I knew it in a book no one would believe you. She wasn't particularly immoral in the accepted sense of the word, her one passion in life was to get men raving mad about her and then turn them down with the shrug of a shoulder and a bored sneer. I tell you, Lord Telford," she cried passionately,

"there have been times when I have had to exercise all my self-restraint not to smother her face with vitriol. She was a fiend—without heart, without pity, without remorse.

"But I waited. There was no hurry, and I had made up my mind what to do. I dropped out hints about my longing to see Sicily; I said I'd heard of the wonderful beauty of Taormina. And one day she suddenly decided to go there.

"‘A beautiful place, my little one,’ she remarked. ‘And one day, when we are there, I will take you to the Greek theater and tell you a story that will amuse you.’

"My heart was thumping so that I thought she must hear it, but I merely smiled and thanked her. And so we come to the night that it happened. We went out after dinner, and walked to the ruins. I knew what was coming, but now that the moment had actually arrived I felt quite calm.

"‘That story you promised to tell me, Comtesse,’ I reminded her. ‘I am full of curiosity.’

"She laughed. Have you ever heard her laugh, Lord Telford, when she was being natural? It was the essence of refined cruelty expressed in a sound. And thus did she laugh that night high up in the old Greek theater.

"‘A story, my dear,’ she said, ‘but not a new one. Merely a man—and a rather stupid man. But then they are all that. This one was rather good-looking, but a dreadful bore. Peter something or other—I’ve forgotten his name. And he wearied me. He was so dreadfully serious. He had some absurd wife in England, I think—and would you believe it, he wanted me to run away with him and marry him. He was most insistent about it. In fact, it was on this very spot,



that he went down on his knees and became positively crude. Of course I mentioned the dear non-existent Comte—my devoted husband—and pointed out that as we were Roman Catholics, divorce was out of the question.

“‘He grew very white, and then the really thrilling thing happened. He said he’d throw himself off the top here unless I came away with him—divorce or no divorce. It was better than a play, and to help him on I laughed in his face. My dear, he did it: right in front of my eyes. Was killed instantly. Luckily there was no one about, and so I got back to my hotel without any one knowing I’d been here all the time. Carruthers—that was his name. I remember now. It must have been quite a shock to the absurd wife.’

“‘It was,’ I said. ‘So she became a companion to you, Comtesse, and now she laughs in your face.’

“She was standing near the edge, Lord Telford, when I seized her. And she gave one scream. Then she disappeared—and the rest you know. I acted, of course. I had to. But it was all cut and dried in my mind. And if it hadn’t—by some strange freak of fate—been you . . .”

She broke off and sat staring at me.

“You two made friends?” Jim’s voice hailed us from across the lawn. “Mum wants to talk to you, Ruth, and hear about your travels.”

Without a word Ruth Carruthers rose and went indoors, and Jim took her vacant chair.

“Good girl, isn’t she, Bill,” he said. “By the way, I wouldn’t mention the fact of that woman’s death. The coincidence of the place might bring things back to her.”

“Precisely,” I murmured. “I won’t.”

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 002 176 127 8